

A Grand Lady's Revival

The Hotel John Marshall's landmark sign rejoins the skyline

BY HARRY KOLLATZ JR

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Photo by Isaac Harrell; below photo courtesy Dementi Studio

Used to be you came downtown to see your dentist and get a haircut, recalls Michael M. Campbell, who was raised in Richmond's Near West End. "And my mom and dad would take to me to the Hotel John Marshall Barbershop," he says.

Completed in 1929, the 16-story Hotel John Marshall opened as one of Richmond's premier hostelries, rising in the downtown skyline like the opening notes of a jazz symphony. During most of the 20th century, the Marshall provided not only well-appointed rooms and good meals, but it served as a nexus for Richmond's culture, entertainment, government and history. Times changed, though, and newer hotels flicked on "Vacancy" signs. By 1988, the careworn Marshall shuffled into the memory of a different downtown, going dormant. Even its dining room demitasse spoons were sold to the nostalgia-afflicted.

In December 2011, after a long period of on-and-off efforts to revive the building, it reopened as an apartment building, the John Marshall Residences. What's offered is a central and urbane locale on East Franklin Street between Fourth and Fifth streets.



Campbell, who recalls childhood memories in the John Marshall's barbershop, grew up to become a principal in Raleigh, N.C.-based Dominion Realty Partners, which now owns and manages the property.

In 2005, the Hampton Roads-based Virginia Atlantic Development Inc., acquired the John Marshall. First in partnership with Commonwealth Architects and then teaming up with Dominion Realty in 2007, Virginia Atlantic began transforming the former 418-room, two-restaurant hotel into a full-service, apartment building with 238 units and, as before, two restaurants. The John Marshall's apartments began renting on Dec. 21, 2011; by early February,

Campbell says, 40 percent of the building's apartments were occupied, or about 95 units.

Strike Up the Band

On Saturday, March 24, 6:30 to 10:30 p.m., the Historic Richmond Foundation inaugurates the John Marshall's role as a major downtown center for grand public functions with a black-tie ball featuring cocktails, a sit-down dinner and dancing with Big Swing and the Ballroom Blasters. Sandy Burns, HRF's development and event planning director, says the event is to celebrate the Marshall's return to the city's life. "We want to underscore that this is a major reason why we do what we do, to assure that historic places like this can remain with us." Tickets are \$180 per person. For information, call 643-7407 or visit historicrichmond.com.

The ground-floor barbershop — named after the hotel but never actually a part of it — was dislodged by the renovations more than five years ago to a temporary location across Franklin Street. It's returning this month to its traditional berth; last month, a black-tie roast celebrated head barber Hugh Campbell.

In early February, workers in hardhats scurried around to complete finishing touches, echoing images of October 1929, when laborers installed carpet on the upper floors and saw to detail work. Traces of the recent past remained: a chalkboard in the former restaurant space, last inhabited by the John Marshall Martini and Bubble Bar, managed an enthusiastic but solemn farewell: "Join Us For New Year's 2005 — \$20 at the door gets you a Champagne toast — Thank you for your loyalty and your company — We will miss you all."

Except for this flurry of occupancy, the Hotel John Marshall drifted for years in downtown Richmond's collective memory like a tattered ghost ship.

The Last Guest

Cynthia Scharf awoke alone in an empty hotel on the morning of June 1, 1988.

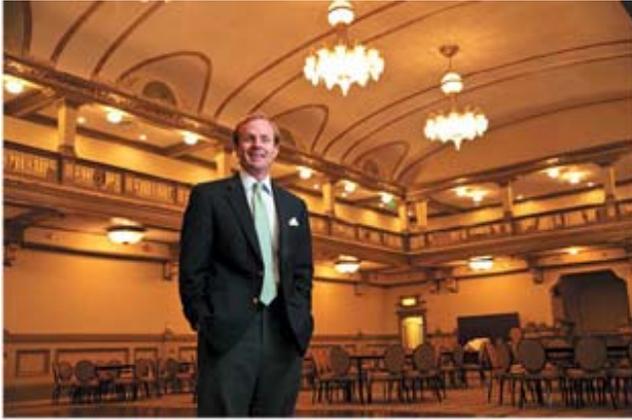
A month earlier she'd chosen Room 400 from a six-month-old brochure in her travel agent's office near Northvale, N.J. The pictures of the John Marshall impressed her, as did the suite for a single-room price of \$55.

Scharf, traveling a day behind her husband after a trip to Florida, told the Richmond Times-Dispatch that on her train voyage home she wanted a "taste of the South and its architecture." She'd instead booked a room in a story reminiscent of the Twilight Zone: the 58-year-old John Marshall, host of presidents, political dealmakers, celebrities and thousands of conventioners, at noon that day ceased operations.

"They said to me that I would be the last guest," Scharf informed reporter Ray McAllister. "I thought that meant I would be the last one checking in or something. I didn't know it meant the only guest."

Some employees met the end with dark humor: The special events board near the front desk read: "Doomsday May 31, 1988."

Scharf, unaware of the historical moment, spent the Marshall's final night watching television.



Clockwise from left: Michael Campbell of developer Dominion Realty Partners stands in John Marshall's newly renovated grand ballroom; 60,000 items were sold off after the hotel closed in 1988; the hotel's ballroom in earlier times; a publicity photo showcases the glitzy lobby after a 1978 makeover. **Clockwise from top left:** Photo by Isaac Harrell; photo courtesy Valentine Richmond History Center; photo courtesy Dementi Studios; photo courtesy Valentine Richmond History Center

What's in a Name?

The propitious occasion of the hotel's grand opening occurred on Oct. 30, 1929, the day following the Wall Street crash. Nonetheless, the ceremony began at 7 p.m. and dinner for 600 guests was served at a cost of \$10 per head (approximately \$135 today). Not a drop of liquor flowed as national Prohibition was still in full swing. The gala's high-profile attendees included Gov. Harry F. Byrd and Richmond Mayor J. Fulmer Bright. The revelers danced to the jazz of showman violinist Billy Lustig and his Scranton Sirens.

The building's construction, bankrolled by businessman Thomas Gresham of Richmond Hotels Inc., first required demolishing the 1844 James Dunlop House at 101 N. Fifth St. Architectural historian Mary Wingfield Scott mourned that the mansion "was beautifully kept up to the very end, and the pearl-gray stucco and white trim, the secluded garden surrounded by its high brick wall, and the tall portico made it a place of romance and beauty."

Yet the Hotel John Marshall also became a place of romance and beauty for many who stayed there. The hotel's name, selected through a contest, paid tribute to John Marshall (1755-1835), the longest-serving U.S. Supreme Court Justice. His historic home stands blocks away where he often entertained guests.

Richmond architect Marcellus E. Wright's design resonated big-city sophistication. In the Marshall, he distilled his studies at the Philadelphia School of Applied Art and experiences in a dozen European countries. Guests entered through a triumphal arch on Fifth Street up formal stairs into a marbled and columned lobby.

The Marshall's advertising boasted of being "The Finest Hotel In The South," with radio outlets in every room; a

private switchboard run by the Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co., rather than by hotel employees; “French-type” phones with supple receiver handsets; the Louis XIV dining room; circulating ice water in every room; and a rooftop garden.

The Chamber of Commerce trumpeted how the city could then boast of 13 hotels “for the accommodation of white guests” with 2,032 rooms — 1,181 of them with connecting baths.

From Politics to Proms

At its height in the 1940s, the Marshall employed 400 people who tended to the needs of 650 guests and assisted Chef Fritz’s kitchens in feeding 1,500 people a day. They included a few permanent residents who’d taken to living there beginning in 1934.

U.S. presidents attended functions there — Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower (with Winston Churchill), Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan. They didn’t stay overnight, but Vice President Spiro T. Agnew did.

In 1963, when the hotel’s exposition hall opened, conventions enlivened the place — in particular, rescue squad workers, undertakers and square dancers. The last convention, in May 1988, was the Order of the Eastern Star. The city’s chapters of Rotary, Lions and Kiwanis clubs, among numerous civic and trade groups, met in its public rooms.

Political life added lore to the place. The Marshall played a major symbolic role in the transfer of power of state governors. On inauguration day, the outgoing executive drove to meet the governor-elect at the hotel and escort him to Capitol Square.

The Virginia Democratic party held its annual Jefferson-Jackson Day event at the Marshall for many years. Huge gatherings followed the 1969 election of Gov. Linwood Holton. The Republican central committee met in a rooftop room in 1978 to select a successor to senatorial candidate Dick Obenshain, who was killed in a plane crash. John Warner was their choice. In 1985, L. Douglas Wilder celebrated his victory as the first African-American to become lieutenant governor in the same room where, as a Virginia Union University student in the late 1940s, he’d waited table for whites only (he could sometimes earn \$3 in tips) and listened to political speeches.

At the John Marshall, high schoolers held proms, couples got engaged, newlyweds hosted reception dinners — and even a few babies were born there. In a 1988 News Leader story, Shirley Dawson recalled taking the streetcar to the John Marshall when she was young, meeting her mother for dinner and then seeing a movie at the sumptuous Loew’s Theater (now part of Richmond CenterStage).

On Oct. 17, 1973, a guest caused a panic that ended in tragedy. Ralph Carattini, an escapee from the federal prison near Petersburg, where he’d served two and a half years on a bank robbery charge, barricaded himself in Room 738 with a rifle purchased from a nearby sporting goods store. During a four-hour standoff, he fired into the street, where he injured no one, but put holes in a few cars. Some 60 guests formed anxious knots in the lobby. Despite the efforts of WRVA news reporter Dave Miller, speaking to him from the barbershop phone, and his wife calling from New Jersey, Carattini couldn’t be persuaded to come out.

At around 5 p.m., rifle-toting police wearing bulletproof vests rushed the door and forced their way in to find Carattini dead in a corner chair, with a .30-caliber rifle between his legs that he’d fired into his chest. He was 24.



Left: to make way for the John Marshall, the elegant 1844 James Dunlop House was demolished; **right:** Attorney Robert Brownhill moved from the West End into the John Marshall soon after it opened. **Left:** photo courtesy Valentine Richmond History Center; **right:** Photo by Jay Paul

Check-Out Time

In 1978, the Marshall public spaces underwent a wild remodeling, intended to add sheen to the hotel's dimming luster. The lobby was redecorated to fit an 18-foot atrium sheathed in polished stainless steel that suggested the period's disco mania. The Fifth Street entrance received glazed tile paving, planters and a revolving door, and 22-karat gold leaf adorned the portal. Club suites were added, as was a new restaurant and cocktail lounge. Swiss-born Walter Santchi came on as head chef. He received a big News Leader spread illustrating his chainsaw-wielding prowess while carving ice sculptures.

But hotels built in the 1980s, anticipating a convention center boom, cast shadows over the Marshall's business. In the summer of 1988, the staff of 175 was laid off, and 60,000 pieces of Hotel John Marshall's history were auctioned — from ballroom chandeliers and a baby grand piano to chafing dishes and doorknobs embossed with the stylized "JM" initials.

The Marshall turned into an episode of *Life Without People*. Seven employees were left to maintain the dormant building. While Harrison & Bates looked for a buyer, former manager Thomas Gardner, who'd been with the Marshall for 53 years, supervised the maintenance.

One didn't just turn a key in a lock and leave a building the size of the Marshall. Gardner explained in 1991 to *Times-Dispatch* writer Ed Crews that with 500 bathrooms, there was no end to cleaning. "All of the toilets must be flushed regularly to keep water in them. If the water isn't there, then the sewer gases can come in the rooms. And you've got to keep the algae out."

Room Service, Send up a Room

Gilbert Granger, a former mayor of Williamsburg who had stayed in the hotel as a youth, bought the building at auction for \$3.16 million on September 30, 1997. City planning officials and the banks seemed aligned to support Granger's enterprise.

But the day after the purchase, City Manager Robert Bobb, who'd championed the hotel's resurrection, resigned. The banks that expressed interest in Granger's efforts soon merged or relocated their headquarters to North Carolina. The disruption caused by the cycle of destruction and construction along Broad and Grace streets didn't improve Granger's tenuous business. He lost \$50,000 a month.

A dozen rooms opened at first and eventually more than 70. The ballroom saw some activity. The John Marshall Martini Kitchen and Bubble Bar opened in late 2003 with the hope of attracting clientele by offering cosmopolitan

libation, entertainment and “frayed elegance,” as a Richmond magazine reviewer described it. But the project wasn’t working. Granger worked out a long-term lease with Virginia Atlantic Development, owned by John C. Camper, which ultimately acquired the John Marshall in 2005. Camper hired Richmond’s Commonwealth Architects to oversee the conversion. Dominion Realty, which has a Richmond office, partnered with Virginia Atlantic in 2007.

Apropos of its opening at the precipice of the Great Depression, the Marshall underwent major renovations on the verge of the current economic downturn. Available credit evaporated as banks fled from speculative projects.

What assured the beginning of the \$70 million overhaul was securing \$40 million in financing from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It also received state and federal historic tax credits. Not all went smoothly.

In the summer of 2010, Commonwealth Architects filed a copyright infringement suit seeking \$2.65 million in damages against Atlanta-based Rule Joy Trammell + Rubio LLC, an architecture and interior-design firm. At issue was ownership of the renovation plans. Commonwealth said it wasn’t paid for more than \$1 million in design, according to a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court. The day before the trial, both firms settled for an undisclosed sum, and the Atlanta company acknowledged in a statement that Commonwealth significantly contributed to the project.

Choate Construction, a firm with offices throughout the Southeast, won the job of remodeling the Marshall into apartments and about 20,000 square feet of retail space.

Suzanne Wolstenholme, renowned regional caterer of The Colony Club restaurant and Homemades by Suzanne, is leasing kitchen and office space and managing the Marshall’s ballrooms. The venue already has about 85 functions planned for the first portion of the new year. This includes a May 12 sweet-and-savory Mother’s Day tea. Wolstenholme says that the big kitchen between the two rooms has undergone a complete overhaul, though the original windows remain. “This is unusual in a commercial kitchen these days,” she says. “In most of them, wall space for storage is what’s important. Many of them are underground. It’ll just be great to see whether it’s sunny or raining.” It may account, on occasion, for people’s moods. Elation is sure to be one, as there are many weddings and rehearsal dinners scheduled. Off the Virginia Room’s mezzanine is a three-room bridal suite, with private bath. Brides enjoy the dramatic entrance down the stairs.

Wolstenholme also intends to offer a food plan for residents. “That way when they get home, their dinner will be in the refrigerator waiting for them,” she says.

Turning on the Lights

Attorney Robert Brownhill returned home to the John Marshall Residences one evening in late January to find the lobby aswirl with tuxedos and cocktail dresses for a birthday celebration. He says wryly, “I felt a little underdressed.”

This will be a part of living in what is to become a premier downtown social space. And that quality served as part of the attraction for Brownhill.

Brownhill, originally from outside Baltimore, previously lived in the West End and commuted to his downtown office. He watched the Marshall’s construction progress from his Franklin Street window.

“I was looking to upgrade,” Brownhill says, “And this was attractive because the nature of the business is that I didn’t want to get stuck trying to flip a house around in the present market.”

The aspect of being a part of something new also appealed to Brownhill. That meant, when he first arrived, that the passenger elevators didn't yet work. Brownhill had to go up the freight lift. But that minor inconvenience was soon fixed. He's played a few rounds of pool in the clubroom and enjoys the feel of the place. His commute now is an elevator ride.

New residents, says Campbell, range in age from the 20s to the 60s, a varying group of students, downtown workers who want to ditch their cars and those downsizing their living arrangements.

The lobby has returned to its Gatsby-esque grandeur. Banished are the disco-mania reflecting panels draped by hanging plants. In came muted colors and furnishings, provided by Rule Joy Trammell + Rubio, as well as big-screen televisions in the clubroom, which has a billiard table and bar. A touch-screen in the lobby allows prospective residents to figure out where their bed would fit in the apartment of choice. Besides the contemporary tech factor, Campbell says there are plans to exhibit historic photographs and memorabilia. The art displayed at present is conventional, not quite Richmond, but in time, this, too, could change.

Rents range from around \$755 a month to \$3,000 for the penthouse suites. Their sweeping views and 14-foot ceilings once belonged to the great rooftop room where Skeet Morris, and many other musical acts, played all those years ago.

Underneath the chandeliers of the elegant Virginia Room, which evokes the ballroom grandeur of an Atlantic luxury cruise liner, Campbell explains how two of the lights, lost to auction, were repurchased some years ago and stored at the Marshall. Barnett's Lighting of Virginia Beach restored them to illuminate the great room.

Each chandelier weighs about 600 pounds and required two years of intensive work, according to Martha Darden, Barnett's owner. When she and husband Mel Blankenship first saw them, the fixtures were in 22 separate cartons stored on what turned out to be a leaky loading dock at the Marshall. Rain damage had rusted the metal frames and brass ornaments. The chandelier pieces were hauled to Virginia Beach on a flatbed truck. When first removing them from the dank containers, Darden recalls the need to take care not to put her hands into rat droppings.

"We had to completely strip all the crystal off the frames," Darden says, and then soak the beads in buckets of muriatic acid that ate off the gunk. "That took forever," she adds, "and many of them were missing. We were ordering crystals every other day." As of yet, she's not seen their shining triumph. "We looked at those things long enough," she wearily laughs.

The iconic Hotel John Marshall sign atop the building was installed in April 2011.

Holiday Signs, of Chester, won the privilege of getting the sign historically right and back on the building. The company's portfolio also includes downtown's MeadWestvaco and McGuire Woods marquees.

Holiday's owner, Bob Morin, explains that two major factors presented a challenge: retaining the vintage look of the sign while also adhering to energy-saving standards required by federal historic renovation regulations. The old letters, made of sheet metal, were rusted out due to years of neglect. New lettering was fabricated to go on the original steel framework atop the building. Some 1,500 incandescent bulbs were replaced by efficient and durable LEDs.

After a number of workshop trials, Holiday's technicians figured out a way to make the new appear old. "We used digital printing on a plastic face to make the LEDs look like light bulbs, with a halo around it. Given the viewing distance of several hundred feet at a minimum, you can see a point of light that fades out."

The Hotel John Marshall sign again highlights the city's skyline as a statement of elegance and hospitality. Although not as bright as before, its roseate glow offers a quiet assurance that downtown Richmond remains alive, as if saying: Oh, yes; we're still here. The music and company are good. Why rush off, then? You might as well stay awhile.

Elvis Was in the Building

When Elvis stayed at the Marshall in 1974 (one of three times), he ensconced himself on the entire eighth floor while off-duty police officers protected him from eager young women



The Bear Facts

A trained bear act was once hired to entertain Roof Garden revelers. The first thought was to send the animal up by elevator, but manager Thomas H. Gardner nixed the idea. The handler led the bear up the stairs with a bellman to “shoo the creature along,” a 1991 Times-Dispatch article recorded.

Liz Ate Here

While a guest, renowned actress Elizabeth Taylor dined at the Captain's Grill. Her waiter that evening was 40-year veteran Columbus R. Dabney. He remarked in 1988,



Too Quick On the Draw

The Tobacco Festival brought celebrity grand marshals to town who usually stayed at the Marshall. *The Virginian* star James Drury annoyed some guests, though, when he fired his six-gun during an elevator ride.

Their Names in Lights

Marquee overnighnters included Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra and Count Basie.





A Little Off the Sides, Please

Actor Bruce Willis used the barbershop for a haircut, shave and manicure in 1997 while filming *The Jackal* here, a few years after Gov. George Allen and former governors Gerald

Baliles and Linwood Holton once all showed up together for their own tonsorial needs.



Porcine Protocol

For a while, dogs were allowed to room with their owners, but sometimes things went too far. A “famous circus clown,” reported the Times-Dispatch in 1947, “made the hotel his home. He brought his pet pig, who was housed in the baggage room.”

Girl in the Picture Tube

In the hotel’s ballroom, Dorothy Vaughan, “The Girl with the Cameo Voice,” participated in one of Virginia’s first — if not one of the country’s first — demonstrations of television in 1939.

NOTE: This article has been corrected since publication.

